



Dynamics of Violence: A Study of the Selected Works of Manjula Padmanabhan

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Received: 24 May 2026; Received in revised form: 21 Jun 2026; Accepted: 25 Jun 2026; Available online: 29 Jun 2026

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Abstract— This article reconceptualises violence in the work of the Indian playwright and novelist Manjula Padmanabhan, arguing that her dramatic and fictional worlds dramatise violence not as a series of discrete, spectacular events but as a continuum that extends from the visible and direct, through the structural and systemic, to the cultural and symbolic. Drawing on Johan Galtung's triad of direct, structural, and cultural violence and Slavoj Žižek's distinction between subjective and objective violence, and supplementing these with Giorgio Agamben's account of bare life, Achille Mbembe's necropolitics, and Pierre Bourdieu's symbolic violence, the study offers close readings of three works that span two decades and two genres: the one-act play *Lights Out* (1984; published 2000), the award-winning dystopian drama *Harvest* (1997), and the speculative novel *Escape* (2008). It contends that Padmanabhan's signal achievement is to render perceptible the objective violence that ordinarily remains invisible precisely because it constitutes the normalised background against which subjective violence appears as aberration. In *Lights Out*, bystander apathy exposes the cultural violence that licenses and aestheticises gendered assault; in *Harvest*, the commodified organ-donor body materialises the necropolitical and structural violence of global capital; and in *Escape*, state-sponsored gendercide reveals the terminal logic of a patriarchal order that has rendered an entire category of life ungrievable. The article concludes that Padmanabhan's characteristically open endings reposition the spectator-reader from complicit passivity toward implicated responsibility, transforming the recognition of violence into an ethical demand.



Keywords— Manjula Padmanabhan, violence, structural violence, necropolitics, bystander apathy, gendercide, Indian English drama, dystopia, biopolitics, postcolonial body

I. INTRODUCTION

Few contemporary Indian writers have anatomised violence with the persistence and conceptual range of Manjula Padmanabhan (b. 1953). A playwright, novelist, cartoonist, illustrator, and journalist, Padmanabhan rose to international prominence in 1997 when *Harvest*, her fifth play, won the inaugural Onassis Award for Theatre, chosen from more than 1,400 entries submitted from over seventy countries. Yet the critical preoccupation with that single triumph has tended to fragment the reception of her oeuvre: *Harvest* is read through the optics of postcolonial commodification and the global organ trade; the earlier one-act play *Lights Out* is approached as a feminist intervention into the representation of sexual assault; and the later

speculative novels *Escape* and *The Island of Lost Girls* are framed within the rubric of gender dystopia and ecofeminism. What this compartmentalisation obscures are the conceptual thread that binds the works together: a sustained, evolving meditation on the nature of violence itself.

This article takes that thread as its subject. It argues that across two decades and two genres, Padmanabhan develops a single, cumulative insight: that violence is most consequential not when it erupts spectacularly into view but when it has been so thoroughly naturalised that it ceases to register as violence at all. Her texts repeatedly stage the moment in which the invisible architecture of harm becomes briefly perceptible, and then ask what the spectator

or reader will do with that perception. To make this argument legible, the study reads three works as a connected sequence rather than as discrete case studies: *Lights Out* (written 1984, published 2000), *Harvest* (1997), and *Escape* (2008). Together, these texts move outward in scale, from the single domestic apartment in which a middle-class couple debate whether to intervene in a rape they can hear but not see, to the one-room tenement annexed by a transnational corporation that purchases the bodies of the poor, to the depopulated nation-state from which women have been all but exterminated. Read in sequence, they trace an expanding cartography of harm.

The article's central claim is that Padmanabhan's work is best understood as a dramaturgy of *objective* violence. Borrowing Slavoj Žižek's terms, subjective violence is the kind visible, eventful, attributable to an identifiable agent that we are conditioned to recognise as violence; objective violence is the systemic and symbolic background that sustains the very normality against which subjective violence is measured (Žižek 2008). Padmanabhan's signal manoeuvre is to invert the usual hierarchy of visibility: the eruptions of direct violence in her texts a scream from a neighbouring building, the arrival of surgical "guards," the hunt for the last surviving girl function less as spectacles in themselves than as apertures through which the spectator glimpses the structural and cultural violence that has made them possible. The remainder of this article develops that claim. After outlining a theoretical framework that synthesises Galtung, Žižek, and a cluster of allied thinkers, it offers three close readings before drawing the works together in a concluding discussion of complicity, witnessing, and the ethics of the open ending.

II. RECONCEPTUALISING VIOLENCE: A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The colloquial understanding of violence is narrow and event-centred: it names a discrete act, performed by an identifiable perpetrator, that inflicts visible physical harm upon a victim. The most productive theoretical work of the last half-century has consisted precisely in widening that frame. Johan Galtung's foundational distinction between *direct*, *structural*, and *cultural* violence remains the indispensable point of departure. Direct violence is the personal, intentional act that the colloquial definition recognises. Structural violence, by contrast, is impersonal and indirect: it is "built into the structure" of a society and "shows up as unequal power and consequently as unequal life chances," such that avoidable deprivation, exploitation, and premature death occur without any identifiable actor pulling a trigger (Galtung 1969: 170–171). Two decades later Galtung completed the triad with *cultural violence*:

those aspects of a culture religion, ideology, language, art that can be "used to justify or legitimize direct or structural violence," rendering exploitation and assault to look, even feel, "right or at least not wrong" (Galtung 1990: 291). The three forms are mutually reinforcing: cultural violence supplies the legitimating discourse, structural violence the durable conditions, and direct violence the periodic, visible enactment.

Žižek's *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections* (2008) sharpens the political stakes of this widened frame. Subjective violence, he argues, is "experienced as such against the background of a non-violent zero level"; it is "seen as a perturbation of the 'normal,' peaceful state of things." Objective violence, conversely, "is precisely the violence inherent to this 'normal' state of things," both the symbolic violence embodied in language and forms of representation, and the systemic violence that is the "often catastrophic consequence of the smooth functioning of our economic and political systems" (Žižek 2008). The crucial corollary is epistemological: because objective violence is invisible, any attention transfixed by spectacular subjective violence is, in effect, complicit, for it accepts as neutral the background that is itself violent. To *see* objective violence, therefore, requires an act of representational defamiliarisation, which is exactly the work that imaginative literature is equipped to perform.

Three further concepts extend this framework to the specific terrains Padmanabhan maps. Giorgio Agamben's *Homo Sacer* (1998) supplies the figure of "bare life": the human being stripped of political and legal status, reduced to mere biological existence, who may be killed without the killing registering as either homicide or sacrifice. Achille Mbembe's "Necropolitics" (2003) names the corollary sovereign capacity "to dictate who may live and who must die," identifying the contemporary deployment of power not merely to discipline life, as in Foucault's biopolitics, but to administer death and to consign whole populations to the status of the "living dead." And Pierre Bourdieu's account of *symbolic violence* most fully elaborated in relation to gender in *Masculine Domination* (2001) describes the "gentle," misrecognised violence by which dominated subjects come to perceive the social order that subordinates them as natural and inevitable, internalising the very categories of their own domination. Taken together, these vocabularies allow violence to be tracked across registers, the bodily and the systemic, the spectacular and the imperceptible, the act and the structure, and it is this layered model that the following readings bring to bear on Padmanabhan's texts.

A methodological note is in order. The readings that follow are close textual analyses informed by these

frameworks rather than applications of a single master theory. Padmanabhan's texts are not illustrations of Galtung or Zizek; they are themselves theorisations of violence in dramatic and narrative form, and at several points they anticipate or complicate the conceptual apparatus brought to bear on them. The aim is a reciprocal illumination in which theory clarifies the texts and the texts, in turn, test and extend the theory.

III. THE ARCHITECTURE OF INACTION: CULTURAL VIOLENCE AND THE SPECTATOR IN *LIGHTS OUT*

Padmanabhan's *Lights Out*, first drafted in 1984 and later anthologised in the Seagull collection *Body Blows: Women, Violence and Survival* (2000), grew out of a piece of journalism prompted by a friend's eyewitness account of a sexual assault witnessed from an apartment in Santacruz, Mumbai, in 1982. The one-act play unfolds entirely within the sixth-floor flat of Leela and Bhaskar, an upper-middle-class couple who, evening after evening, hear the screams of a woman being assaulted in the unfinished building opposite. The dramaturgical decision that organises the entire work is one of strategic withholding: the assault is never shown. It exists only as sound cries, scuffles, the noise of bodies filtered through the windows and, more importantly, through the increasingly elaborate interpretations the characters construct to explain it away.

This formal choice is the play's principal instrument of critique. By placing the violence offstage and the spectators onstage, Padmanabhan reverses the conventional economy of theatrical attention. The dramatic action is not the assault but the conversation about the assault the protracted, almost ritualised deliberation over whether what is happening is in fact happening, whether it is their concern, and what, if anything, ought to be done. The audience is thereby positioned not as witness to a crime but as witness to a witnessing, and is made to watch the precise mechanisms by which a society talks itself out of intervention. In Galtung's terms, the play stages cultural violence in the very act of its operation: we observe, in real time, the legitimating discourses that convert an atrocity into a non-event.

Those discourses are catalogued with mordant precision. Bhaskar and his friend Mohan cycle through a series of rationalisations, each of which functions to relocate the screams outside the domain of moral obligation. Perhaps it is a religious ceremony; perhaps it is a domestic quarrel and therefore private; perhaps the woman is of a class or kind whose suffering does not demand response; perhaps to telephone the police would be to invite trouble upon themselves. Each hypothesis is a small act of symbolic

violence in Bourdieu's sense, an exercise in misrecognition that naturalises inaction. The men's deliberations are not the failure of an ethical framework but the smooth functioning of one framework in which class insulation, the gendered partition of public and private, and a propertied anxiety about respectability cooperate to produce a perfectly reasoned paralysis.

Leela's position is more complex and is the play's affective centre. She alone is unable to convert the screams into background noise; she hears the woman's voice in her sleep and is rendered hysterical by it. Yet her response is not intervention but a frantic sealing of the domestic envelope, closing windows, drawing curtains, shutting the children's door as though the violence could be unmade by being unheard. Her terror is genuine, but it is also a privatised, self-protective response that leaves the structure of inaction intact. In this Padmanabhan refuses an easy gendered consolation: the woman who feels the horror most acutely is no more able to act than the men who explain it away, because the architecture of inaction is not a matter of individual callousness but of a shared social grammar. The play's bleakest suggestion is that empathy, uncoupled from a vocabulary of responsibility, collapses into the same passivity as indifference.

There is, moreover, a disquieting eroticisation in the men's spectatorship that the play stages to indict. As they strain to interpret the sounds and to reconstruct the scene from auditory fragments, the woman's agony is incrementally transformed into a spectacle to be parsed, debated, and in a register the text registers with revulsion consumed. The assault becomes, for the watchers, a kind of theatre, and Padmanabhan implicates the play's own audience in this dynamic, for we too are listening, interpreting, waiting. The metatheatrical mirror is deliberate: the apartment is a private box from which a violation is observed without being interrupted, and the parallel to the auditorium is exact. The play thereby turns the apparatus of dramatic pleasure into an ethical accusation, asking whether the act of watching suffering for meaning is not itself a mode of participation.

Read against the framework set out above, *Lights Out* is a study of the relation between cultural and direct violence. The rape in the opposite building is the eruption of subjective, direct violence, but the play's true object is the cultural violence in the watching flat the legitimating apparatus that ensures the direct violence will continue unimpeded. Crucially, the perpetrators of the assault are never characterised, never given psychology or motive. This is not an oversight, but the argument: to anatomise the rapists would be to locate the violence in aberrant individuals and thereby to exonerate the social order. By

keeping the assailants faceless and training its entire attention on the respectable witnesses, the play insists that the scandal is not the existence of men who rape but the existence of a society organised to permit them to do so. The open, unresolved ending, the screams continuing, the intervention never made, withholds catharsis precisely so that the burden of response is transferred, unmetabolised, to the spectator beyond the stage.

IV. THE COMMODIFIED BODY: STRUCTURAL VIOLENCE AND NECROPOLITICS IN HARVEST

If *Lights Out* anatomises the cultural violence of inaction within a single class and a single city, *Harvest* enlarges the frame to the planetary scale of global capital. Set in a near-future Mumbai, the play imagines a transnational corporation, InterPlanta Services, that brokers the purchase of healthy organs from the destitute poor of the global South for transplantation into wealthy clients in the global North. The unemployed Om Prakash, unable to find work, signs a contract that commits not only his organs but his entire bodily existence to an anonymous American recipient named Ginni, who monitors and controls the family through a screen. In exchange, Om's one-room tenement is fitted with appliances, food, and sanitation, and his wife Jaya and mother Ma are drawn, with him, into a regime of total surveillance designed to keep the donor body pristine until it is required.

The play's premise literalises structural violence in Galtung's precise sense. The mechanism that consumes Om is not a person but a structure a contract, a corporation, a market in which no individual can be located as the author of harm. Ginni, the apparent agent, is herself eventually revealed to be an image, a manufactured interface; the violence is distributed across a system that operates with the bland efficiency of a service industry. The donors are not assaulted; they are processed. This is exploitation rendered as logistics, and its horror lies in its legality, its consent, and its calm. Om has, after all, agreed. That the agreement is the product of an economic coercion so total that it forecloses any genuine alternative is exactly Galtung's point: structural violence produces "unequal life chances" that constrain the moral options of the poor while preserving the fiction of free choice.

Agamben and Mbembe sharpen what the play does to the body. Once contracted, Om is reduced to bare life: a biological reserve maintained for its harvestable organs, stripped of the autonomy that would make him a political subject while being kept scrupulously, even obsessively, alive. His health is no longer his own; it is the property of the recipient, and the elaborate hygiene regime imposed

upon the household, the germ-free zone, the dietary control, the regulation of when and how he may use the bathroom, is the biopolitical administration of a life that exists only to be drawn upon. This is necropolitics in Mbembe's sense, but with an instructive inversion: sovereignty here exercises its power over death not by killing but by deferring death, keeping the donor in a suspended state of living-for-the-purpose-of-dying. The body of the poor man of the global South becomes, precisely, the "living dead" sustained as a resource, denied as a person.

The play is equally attentive to the colonial genealogy of this arrangement. The traffic of organs runs unidirectionally, from South to North, from the dark and crowded tenement to the sanitised, disembodied affluence represented by the screen. Critics have rightly read the play as a fable of how the first world "cannibalises" the third to satisfy its own appetites, and the metaphor of cannibalism is apt: *Harvest* stages globalisation as a literal incorporation of one body into another, an alimentary relation in which the wealthy are sustained by the dismemberment of the poor. The neo-colonial extraction of raw materials, historically of minerals, labour, and land, is here updated to the extraction of the body itself, the last commodity frontier. What Frantz Fanon described as the colonial relation's foundation in the appropriation of the colonised body finds, in Padmanabhan's conceit, a grimly literal twenty-first-century form.

Yet *Harvest* is not a play of pure abjection, and its treatment of resistance distinguishes it sharply from *Lights Out*. Where the earlier play withholds any act of agency, *Harvest* locates a residual capacity for refusal in Jaya, Om's wife, who alone declines to be seduced by the comforts the contract supplies. When the apparatus finally seeks to claim her to convert her, too, into a body for use, she refuses the terms of the transaction outright. In the play's celebrated final confrontation, she withholds the one thing the system requires, her consent and her living presence, and threatens self-destruction as the single act of sovereignty still available to a person who owns nothing but her own death. Her defiance is ambiguous and costly; it secures no liberation and offers no programme. But it marks the point at which the commodified body reclaims itself by refusing to be consumed, asserting a negative freedom, the freedom to deny against a structure that has monetised every positive capacity. In Žižek's terms, Jaya's refusal is a flicker of subjective counter-violence directed, at last, not at another victim but at the objective violence of the system itself.

The dramaturgy reinforces the thematic. The disembodied screen through which Ginni surveils and commands the household is a precise emblem of objective violence: power that is everywhere and nowhere, that acts

without a locatable body, that cannot be confronted because it has no face to confront. The contrast between the hyper-embodied poor sweating, eating, defecating, ageing in their single room and the bodiless, image-borne affluence that consumes them is the play's structural axis. *Harvest* thus completes a movement begun in *Lights Out*: where the earlier play exposed the cultural violence that legitimates harm, the later one exposes the structural and systemic violence that institutionalises it, converting the body of the poor into raw material for a market that has perfected the art of consuming persons while observing every formality of consent.

V. GENDERCIDE AND THE UNGRIEVABLE: SYSTEMIC VIOLENCE IN ESCAPE

Padmanabhan's novel *Escape* (2008) carries the logic of her earlier work to its terminal conclusion. The novel is set in an unnamed country, sealed off from the rest of the world and ruled by a triumvirate of cloned "Generals," in which women have been systematically exterminated. Reproduction has been severed from women altogether: men replicate themselves through cloning, and femaleness has been redefined as contamination, the women of the past dismissed as a "vermin tribe." Into this depopulated landscape, Padmanabhan places Meiji, a girl raised in concealment by three brothers, her "uncles", who is, so far as anyone knows, the last surviving female. The plot follows the uncles' desperate attempt to smuggle her out of the country before she is discovered, a journey that doubles as Meiji's gradual, painful discovery of her own difference and of the meaning of the category "woman" that has been erased from her world.

Where *Harvest* dramatises structural violence as economic extraction, *Escape* dramatises it as policy the elevation of misogyny from a diffuse social condition to an explicit programme of extermination. Gendercide is the novel's premise, and its conceptual force lies in the way it makes visible, by extrapolation, a violence already present in the world the reader inhabits. The skewed sex ratios produced by sex-selective abortion and female neglect in parts of contemporary South Asia furnish the novel's grim referent; *Escape* simply completes the trajectory, asking what a society organised around the elimination of women would look like once the elimination is complete. The speculative form here performs precisely the defamiliarising function that the recognition of objective violence requires: by carrying an existing structural tendency to its logical endpoint, the novel renders perceptible a systemic violence that, in its ordinary distributed form, remains beneath the threshold of attention.

Judith Butler's account of the differential distribution of grievability illuminates the novel's deepest stratum. In a world that has defined the female as vermin, women are not merely killed but rendered *ungrievable* placed outside the frame within which a life counts as a life whose loss would register as loss. The violence of *Escape* is therefore not only the direct violence of extermination but the prior, framing violence that determines whose disappearance can be mourned. Meiji's predicament is the embodiment of this condition: she cannot understand what she is because the very category through which she might know herself has been expunged from language and memory. She is a subject without a name for her own subjecthood, which is symbolic violence in its most absolute form, not the misrecognition of one's domination, as in Bourdieu, but the foreclosure of the conceptual resources by which domination might be recognised at all.

The novel also extends Padmanabhan's persistent concern with surveillance and the administered body. The Generals are "continuously radio-linked," fused into a single distributed sovereign through sub-retinal implants; their power, like Ginni's screen in *Harvest*, is panoptic, faceless, and total. Meiji's life is one of perpetual hiding and observation, her body managed and concealed, her selfhood deferred. Here, the Foucauldian disciplinary apparatus and the Mbembean necropolitical converge: the regime both administers life down to its biological substrate and reserves to itself the sovereign decision over which forms of life may exist. The ecological register of the novel deepens the indictment. The land has been rendered barren by radioactive contamination, and Padmanabhan draws an explicit homology between the extermination of women and the despoliation of nature both are reproductive capacities that the regime has declared expendable, the fertile cast out as surplus. The violence done to women and the violence done to the earth are revealed as expressions of a single logic of domination that equates control with the elimination of whatever it cannot fully master.

And yet, as in *Harvest*, Padmanabhan refuses to surrender the possibility of resistance. Meiji's slow movement from drugged ignorance toward self-knowledge is itself a counter-violence against a system predicated on the erasure of her consciousness; the very fact of her continued existence is a refutation of the regime's totalising claim. The uncles' sacrificial labour to preserve her, costly and uncertain in its outcome, asserts the persistence of an ethical bond in a world engineered to extinguish it. The escape of the title is partial, perilous, and incomplete the narrative resists any triumphal resolution but it preserves, against the logic of extermination, the bare survival of the category the regime sought to annihilate. As in her dramatic work, Padmanabhan declines catharsis, leaving the reader

with a survival too fragile to console and too stubborn to dismiss.

VI. THE CONTINUUM OF VIOLENCE: COMPLICITY, WITNESSING, AND THE OPEN ENDING

Read in sequence, the three works compose a single, expanding argument about violence. *Lights Out* isolates the cultural violence of legitimization the discourses and dispositions by which a society licenses harm and excuses itself from response. *Harvest* exposes the structural and systemic violence of an economic order that converts the bodies of the poor into commodities while preserving the formalities of consent. *Escape* follows the systemic logic to its terminus, imagining the complete extermination of a category of life rendered ungrievable in advance. The movement is one of increasing scale and decreasing visibility of the agent from the identifiable, if faceless, rapists in the building opposite, to the diffuse corporate apparatus that has no body, to the cloned distributed sovereign in whom agency has dissolved entirely into system. As the perpetrator recedes, the violence intensifies. This is Padmanabhan's central, cumulative insight: the most devastating violence is the least attributable, because attribution is the precondition of resistance, and a violence without an author is a violence that can present itself as nature.

Three motifs recur across the works and consolidate the argument. The first is *the body as the surface on which macro-violence is inscribed*. In each text, an abstract systemic logic of patriarchal contempt, capitalist extraction, and exterminatory misogyny is made legible by being written upon a specific, gendered, vulnerable body: the screaming woman, the harvested donor, the hidden last girl. Padmanabhan's materialism insists that structures are never merely abstract; they are always, finally, enacted upon flesh, and it is the flesh that bears the cost the structure conceals. The second motif is *surveillance and the disembodiment of power*. From the watching apartment, to Ginii's screen, to the radio-linked Generals, power in Padmanabhan's worlds increasingly observes without being observed, acts without being locatable, and thereby renders itself immune to confrontation a precise figuration of the invisibility that defines objective violence.

The third and most ethically charged motif is *complicity and the position of the witness*. Each work is structurally organised around an act of watching: the couple who listen to the assault, the family who are watched and who watch their own commodification on a screen, the reader who observes Meiji's concealment. Padmanabhan is relentless in implicating these acts of witness in the violence

they observe. To watch and not to act, her texts insist, is not neutrality but participation; the spectator who consumes suffering for meaning, whether the men in the flat or the audience in the auditorium, occupies a position continuous with the violence on display. This is why her endings refuse resolution. The unbroken screams of *Lights Out*, Jaya's unresolved last stand in *Harvest*, the incomplete escape of *Escape* each withholds the catharsis that would allow the spectator-reader to discharge the discomfort of witnessing and return to equilibrium. The open ending is not a failure of closure but an ethical strategy: by denying the audience release, Padmanabhan transfers the unmetabolised burden of response from the stage or page to the world beyond it.

In this the work performs the very operation that the theoretical recognition of objective violence demands. If objective violence is invisible because it constitutes the background of normality, then the task of a politically serious art is to defamiliarise that background to make the structural and the cultural briefly perceptible as violence rather than as the way things simply are. Padmanabhan's withholding dramaturgy and her refusal of catharsis are the formal instruments of this defamiliarisation. They convert the spectator from a position of complicit passivity, in which the violence of the normal goes unseen, into one of implicated responsibility, in which the spectator can no longer plead ignorance of what has been shown. The recognition of violence becomes, in her hands, an ethical demand that the text deliberately declines to satisfy on the audience's behalf.

This reading also clarifies the relation between Padmanabhan's realism and her turn to speculative and dystopian form. The movement from the documentary realism of *Lights Out* to the science-fictional premises of *Harvest* and *Escape* is not a retreat from the real but an intensification of the project of making it visible. Speculation, in Padmanabhan, is a method of extrapolation: by carrying an existing structural tendency commodification, gendercide to its logical endpoint, the dystopian form renders perceptible a violence that, in its ordinary distributed condition, remains beneath notice. The estranging device of the near-future or the alternate world is, paradoxically, a realist instrument, a way of seeing the present more clearly by displacing it. Her dystopias are diagnostic rather than predictive; they describe the logic of the now rather than the contingencies of the future.

VII. CONCLUSION

This article has argued that Manjula Padmanabhan's selected works constitute a sustained and evolving dramaturgy of violence, one whose conceptual ambition has been obscured by the tendency to read her texts in isolation

and within separate generic frames. Read together, *Lights Out*, *Harvest*, and *Escape* trace a continuum that runs from cultural through structural to systemic violence, and they share a single formal and ethical commitment: to render perceptible the objective violence that ordinarily passes for the neutral background of social life. By inverting the usual hierarchy of visibility placing spectators rather than perpetrators at the centre, withholding the spectacle in order to expose its enabling conditions, and refusing the catharsis that would let the witness off the hook Padmanabhan transforms the recognition of violence into an unfinished ethical task that she deliberately bequeaths to her audience.

The significance of this achievement extends beyond the study of a single author. Padmanabhan's work offers a model for how imaginative literature can perform the conceptual labour that the most demanding theories of violence require: the labour of making the invisible visible, of restoring agency and attribution to harms that present themselves as natural, and of converting the spectator from consumer to witness and from witness to participant. In an era increasingly governed by faceless and distributed forms of power algorithmic, corporate, infrastructural her insistence that the gravest violence is the least attributable acquires a renewed and uncomfortable pertinence. Future scholarship might productively extend this framework to *The Island of Lost Girls* and to her short fiction, and might examine in greater depth the formal mechanics of the open ending across her corpus. What this study has sought to establish is that, beneath the variety of her genres and the two decades that separate her earliest from her latest work here considered, Padmanabhan returns again and again to a single, urgent proposition: that to see violence truly is already to be answerable to it.

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